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*Verda Freeman Welcome*

*A  
Person  
of  
Principle*

## MARYLAND GENERAL ASSEMBLY

STATE HOUSE

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Verda Welcome, 1907-1990, was a teacher, a pioneer in the civil rights movement, a trail-blazing legislator for a quarter of a century and a creative political organizer. She opened doors that had been forever closed, and was the first black woman to serve in a state senate anywhere in the United States. Senator Welcome lifted barriers in public facilities in Maryland for all of its citizens regardless of race. She fought for equal treatment for women in the workplace, and battled for dignity in life for the poor and the defenseless.

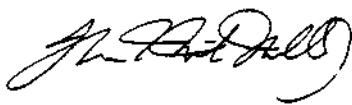
A champion of education for all, a teacher from Coppin Normal School, she went on to win higher degrees from Morgan State University and New York University. Committed to civic and social activism, Senator Welcome changed the political map of her adopted city of Baltimore. She succeeded in a raucous era by grace and tenacity, inspiring a new generation of leaders.

Born and raised on a small North Carolina farm, one of sixteen children, she came to Maryland to teach, married Dr. Henry C. Welcome in 1935, and embarked on her public career. "If I believed in it, I worked for it and fought for it," she once said. Senator Verda Welcome's life showed her words were matched by deeds.

It was an honor to authorize the commissioning of a portrait of such an important representative of the Maryland General Assembly. We hope that this booklet will further recognize Senator Welcome's contributions both in the State of Maryland and on a national level.



R. Clayton Mitchell, Jr.



Thomas V. Mike Miller, Jr.

## Verda Freeman Welcome

March 18, 1907 — — April 22, 1990

### A Person of Principle

Senator Verda Welcome took Delegate Lena K. Lee for a ride one snowy winter's day from Baltimore to Harrisburg. They headed for a strategy meeting of black state legislators from the region. Warnings of dangerous conditions didn't deter the Senator. At the end of their slippery journey, they found that no other out-of-state lawmakers had dared to risk the perilous roads. But the Senator was satisfied. She had given her word. She had kept her faith to do whatever was necessary to promote her life's work, helping those of her race in every way possible.

Delegate Hattie Harrison thought the deed matched her frequent words of advice. "Always make sure that when you make a promise, keep it!" That was a small but essential part of the Welcome secret that allowed her to take the long voyage from the hills of the South to the legislative halls of Annapolis to become Maryland's and the nation's first black woman senator.

Those twenty-five years were the visible and public high point of a life of achievement for a woman who opened doors that had been racially closed and let in the sunshine of equality and justice. It was a longer and more treacherous journey than the one she took to Harrisburg over snow and ice.

"I had the good fortune to be a part of the battle for civil rights, the most noble struggle in our country's modern history," she concluded once in looking back on her life. "We pledged our lives, our time, and our resources to fighting for fundamental changes in the way people have been treated. As a woman, I was doubly fortunate. I not only

participated in the struggle for black equality; but I have lived to see women move towards equal footing in the political and social community."

While Verda Welcome became a national figure in breaking the barrier to become the first black woman in an upper chamber in an American state legislature, she could claim equal honors for sponsoring or supporting a wide body of laws that provided more dignity and opportunity to all Marylanders.

The list of her accomplishments in Annapolis is long. One would have to start with her successful battles for a public accommodations law that ended humiliating treatment for African-Americans by opening hotels and restaurants to them. Even when she was a member of the House of Delegates, Verda Welcome had the door closed to her at an Ocean City conference. There was no respectable place there for her. She was a leader in the now too obvious proposition that equal pay must be had for equal work.

She was instrumental in the passage of laws on gun control and voter registration by mail, and caused an investigation that led to regulation of motor vehicle insurance. Senator Welcome was a persistent pioneer to ban smoking in certain public places, long before health authorities warned of the dangers of secondary effects of cigarette fumes. "You smokers do what you want to do but don't force me and two-thirds of the population to inhale your smoke," she told the Senate.

It was a battle to win university status for Morgan State College, but she did it. For a dozen years, the campus of the school had been divided by a busy street. It took Senator Welcome to push the State to have a foot bridge built for safety and convenience. When she died, students draped the bridge in mourning for her.

She was the sponsor of grants for a new Provident Hospital, now Liberty Medical Center. She helped create the Commission on Afro-American History and Culture.

As a delegate, she was part of a history-making decision. In 1959, Maryland's General Assembly finally ratified the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. It had failed to do so more than a century earlier when the amendment assuring blacks of their civil rights was adopted by the nation.

If these were some of her larger measures, it was the myriad of smaller bills, those concerning a respect for the individual, that won her applause and gratitude. Senator Welcome made sure that the blind had access to public facilities. She fought on the Senate floor against a continued harassment of welfare recipients. When there was no rank available for a woman police officer deserving promotion, she helped create one. For those erroneously jailed, she saw to it that they were paid a minimum wage for their time confined. She made sure of laws restricting retaliation by landlords against tenants. She even pursued legislation to limit the sale of eggs considered unfit in ordinary markets but which were being used in homes for the elderly.

She learned how to compromise in the give-and-take of the legislative process but never surrendered her principles. Her strongest point was her ability to get along, to win the friendship of those who may have disagreed completely with her. She could appreciate another point of view.

"We just got along beautifully," said Senator Frederick C. Malkus, who didn't often agree with her although he chaired the Senate's Judicial Proceedings Committee when a stream of civil rights legislation was passed. He remembered her personal touches, how she made much of his children and took him and his wife to dinner at an elegant Charleston restaurant. "She was a dynamo."

Delegate Harrison remembers her advice to newcomers, "Let your words and deeds speak for themselves." She smiled, she was sweet, she talked softly but never lost sight of her goals. "You don't have to talk loud, you don't have to jump up and down on the floor."

"She was always true to her word," recalled former Senate President James Clark. He was impressed how "tenacious" she could be pursuing her goals, always "trying to help her people". Rabbi Murray Saltzman of the Baltimore Hebrew Congregation served together with Senator Welcome for "a wonderful three years" on the Martin Luther King Commission, traveling together to Annapolis for monthly meetings. On the trips, they talked about values and religion. He marveled at her persistent, never-take-no for an answer attitude.

Governor Harry Hughes, a former Senate colleague and ally, affirmed her persistence. He recalled how she would call on him even on Sundays when she had a special problem for the chief executive. "She was a twenty-four hours a day person in anything in which she was interested." There was so much demand on her time that former Senator Louise Gore could not believe how she kept up with her work. "Her phone was always ringing."

Another old Senate friend, Lieutenant Governor Melvin A. Steinberg, found Senator Welcome "a true public servant. She truly loved her causes." Chief District Court Judge Robert E. Sweeny said of her, "A good and decent woman, free of bombast, a proud woman who was not in politics for herself."

Neither did Senator Welcome try to dominate her share of the political spectrum. She spawned a new generation of political leaders. Delegate Howard P. Rawlings acknowledged that she was his "political godmother". So did Senator Clarence W. Blount. "She took me under her wing, whether I wanted it or not, defended me when she thought I needed defending." When Baltimore Mayor Kurt Schmoke started his first political race, it was Senator Welcome who told him to continue because he was a winner. And Representative Kweisi Mfume credited her with the right nudge and backing that sent him to Congress.

Politics had an uglier side for Senator Welcome and not in the halls of the legislature. Coming home from a meeting on April 10, 1964, she parked by her home. Before getting out of the car, she reached back to pick up her literature, a fortunate move. Five shots were fired, two of them crashing through the windshield. She was not seriously injured. Four men were in due time arrested and tried for what the prosecutor described as a "cold-blooded, unprovoked, political assassination or personal vendetta" against her. Three of the four accused were later convicted of conspiracy charges.

For the Senator, a far greater sorrow came in 1979 when her lifetime "pal" and husband, Dr. Henry C. Welcome, died at the age of 72. For forty-three years they had shared their lives. "Our love, like our dreams, grew ripe with success," she explained. "We never resented the other's achievements. Instead, we made each other great." She took comfort in her daughter, Mary Sue, who was an attorney in Atlanta, and in watching her grandson, Gregory Welcome Mercer, grow into an athlete and a scholar.

After twenty-five years as a public servant, she ran one more time in 1982. Perhaps her heart was not in the contest. She had been ill during the campaign. Perhaps it was time to leave the political stage to those she had inspired. Her plate was full. She lost and entered retirement, but one that was as active as the old days. She was never one to quit or stop fighting.

The years took away her health. It was fortunate that her daughter, Mary Sue, was able to return from Atlanta and be with her mother when she died peacefully at home on a Sunday morning, April 22, 1990. She had just turned 83. The city and State mourned the loss but could take comfort in her generous legacy. Her life had been an extraordinary American success, a testament of courage and persistence.

## The Person Behind the Principle

Born on a farm high in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina on March 18, 1907, Verda Mae Freeman was the third child of John Nuborn and Ella Docia Freeman. There would be thirteen more children added to the Freeman family, one of but four families that made up the settlement of Uree, more often called Freeman Town, and now called Lake Lure. The soil was fertile and the Freemans earned their living from it.

Though the harvests were rich in every variety of produce, it meant early risings for the children to pick, clean and pack so that Mr. Freeman could reach the morning markets in Asheville and ride the streets for door-step sales. The autumn meant clearing the peach and apple orchards. Late fall and winter were the seasons for cutting and loading wood.

Mr. Freeman was respected by everyone who touched the small isolated community. Unlike many other black families, the Freemans had a long history of land ownership and a longer heritage of freedom, as the family name proclaimed. He was a strict patriarch, imposing his beliefs on the family. If he were suspicious that piped-in running water might hurt or kill someone, the family would do without it. The tall and slender man with soft eyes had other beliefs that all were to follow. It was a matter of faith that every man and woman, every boy and girl, was on earth to improve their lot on earth. The Freemans lived and toiled and believed in his visionary creed.

Mrs. Freeman both reinforced and softened the demanding daily routine. She was kind, with a good disposition to all, and she wanted more for her children, education for her sons and daughters though she understood that somebody had to stay and help on the farm. "Mother taught us early to walk and talk as if we owned a piece of the world," Senator Welcome recalled.

Outside of the hill enclave of the Freemans, the world was at best indifferent to black Americans and, at worst, hostile. In Senator Welcome's childhood, conditions for African-Americans in the country were deteriorating. From the Niagara Movement there came the anguished indictment that the race "needs help and is given hindrance, needs protection and is given mob violence, needs justice and is given charity, needs leadership and is given cowardice and apology, needs bread and is given a stone". Racial prejudice was endemic. Racial violence was common, so much so that some of the scores of lynchings were reported in newspapers in mere paragraphs, the same space afforded a summer thunderstorm, something to be endured, something to be shrugged away.

How much were the Freemans aware of the strife and storms? They could not have been aloof though they were respected in their community by men of all races. They persisted in their way. Education was that way, Mrs. Freeman had said. And Senator Welcome went to the Mary B. Mullen Institute, one of the hundreds of schools sponsored after the Civil War by the American Missionary Association. It was a far better start than the inferior and segregated schools of North Carolina. The Mullen school, Senator Welcome would recall, "provided me with a window to the larger world beyond the mountains". She said it was "my first opportunity to meet and interact with whites, who made up most of the teaching staff".

At sixteen, Senator Welcome went to the Peabody Institute for two years, where she chose a teaching career. In 1926, at the age of 19, she began her career teaching at Greenhill Elementary School, where she was paid \$35 a month. All but \$10 went to her father to help support the family. "I was convinced that I was going to be the best teacher possible." Her pupils were farm children, boys and girls, some bigger than she was, many learning to read for the first time. The usual school rule was to

paddle the pupils to gain their attention. Senator Welcome tried her mother's way—kindness. "I just demanded respect and eventually got it," she explained.

The State paid a teacher's salary then but the local school board arranged for their boarding. Living with strangers, independently, "in the outside world," she learned different ways of the world. On visits home, she found that she could talk to her mother woman-to-woman about things never mentioned in the past. "We talked about how soft words and a firm character accounted for more than harsh words or violence. My mother taught me how to carry myself as a woman; she taught me that my sex and my color were not barriers, regardless of what others may tell me." Those were words she would live by. What mattered was her own inner image.

Accepted as an equal, a full-grown woman, Senator Welcome went back to teaching. She was convinced that she was now in "a life of new beginnings, life as a full-fledged, independent adult". The euphoria was not to last. A few months later, in February, 1928, her mother died. It was a tragic and unexpected death that came after her mother had given birth to her sixteenth child. Her mother had suffered serious pains following delivery. Senator Welcome rushed home to hear the news. Her sister, Emma, told her how "my mother cried, then turned to face the wall and died".

The death "shattered" the family. Senator Welcome's father wept as the family mourned. He wanted some of the older children to stay home to help raise the younger ones. For Senator Welcome, it was a cross-roads decision. "I had never intentionally disobeyed my father, but my mother's dreams meant more to me than my father's wishes," she explained later. She was torn by her father's needs and her mother's dreams.

The maternal vision won. She would go North. She would climb the ladder of high hopes, the rungs of education. The first stop was Wilmington, Delaware, the home of distant cousins, Elmer and

Florence Stubbs, where she finally achieved a full high school diploma. She was a student by day and a domestic the rest of the time. There was nothing but work, it seemed. "I learned that you don't get everything you want," she wrote later. "I learned that it's not going to go your way all the time and that you have to show respect for people who have gone out of their way to help you. I had to make the daily sacrifices needed to keep my dreams intact."

Baltimore was the next step up the ladder. She was accepted for the 1930 session at Coppin Normal School, then a two-year teacher preparatory school. Other than Morgan State College, Coppin was the only college open to blacks. Again, she would stay with distant relatives, Dr. and Mrs. James White and their four children. Again, she would face the tiring labor of being a student and a domestic baby sitter. She also had to hunt for more work to pay for tuition.

It was the worst of times for the country, particularly in Maryland if you were an ambitious young black woman. "You know Maryland was a segregated state at that time," Senator Welcome would recall later. "We knew where we could go and where we could not go. I stayed in my place—isn't it awful to have to say that?"

"What was that place? It was wherever they wanted you to stay and you ate whatever they wanted you to eat," she recalled.

Historians like George H. Callcott regard those times, the decade of the 1920s and into the early 1930s, as "the low point" for Maryland's black citizens since the days of slavery. Harsh laws of segregation prevailed. Color lines in Baltimore's neighborhoods identified blocks in which each race could reside. Railroad cars and buses were separate. So were parks and sporting events, restaurants, hospitals, jails, water fountains, toilets, and even stores. There were no blacks in the Baltimore police or fire departments. Blacks were generally excluded from public libraries, museums, art galleries, and banks. Even menial jobs had a color line. For much of the Twenties, State spending for education for

each black child was but a third of what it was for a white pupil. Black mortality rates, for both adults and children, were double that of whites.

All this came against a background of open public hostility. Maryland had one of the largest Ku Klux Klan memberships in the nation. Even otherwise respectable politicians accused blacks for most of the problems in society, ranging from crime to high taxes. Since 1884, the State had witnessed some sixteen lynchings.

It was not until 1927 that the General Assembly enacted an Interracial Commission. Dominated by whites, it issued reports congratulating itself and the State on harmonious race relations in the face of a different reality.

Senator Welcome survived those bitter days by closing her eyes. "I was struggling, trying to get through school, therefore I could not say but so much," she confessed. "I was not in a position to demand respect, so I just tried to accept the discourtesy I was subjected to and kept on going."

But she and others had a secret. They used to laugh at those "crazy white folks". They knew the situation was impossible. "We laughed because there was not anything else that we could do to make us feel better," Senator Welcome recalled. "I guess that was our way of getting back at them. You knew who and what you were and, therefore, to appease yourself, you laughed at them."

With the country sliding in what would become the Great Depression, Senator Welcome despaired about finding work. Unemployment figures rose, with black jobless rates far higher than that of whites. In the gloom, Senator Welcome found hope. "In the spring of 1931, God sent me a woman who became almost a second mother to me," she remembered. She met Anne Harris at Enon Baptist Church. She would learn later that Mrs. Harris saw in Senator Welcome a resemblance to a daughter she had been forced to leave behind in Virginia. The second mother provided Senator Welcome with diversions from her grind of books and baby sitting.

There were spirituals at the church, an occasional dance, and above all some lessons in cards. Mrs. Harris taught Senator Welcome how to play pinochle, a game she would master and enjoy for pure relaxation.

Every summer, Mrs. Harris worked as a domestic at the old Majestic Hotel in Ocean City. In the steaming months of 1932, she found a menial but acceptable job for Senator Welcome at the hotel, her first task as a domestic for whites. Senator Welcome became a bath attendant, washing and drying bathing suits.

"I soon learned to handle the work," she recalled, "but I could never get used to the racism I encountered." Up to that point, she had lived what seemed to her "sort of a privileged life". Her family had known dignity in North Carolina. Her teachers had been white teachers in the missionary schools. Her encounters with segregation and racism had been limited by her own choice. Now she met surly and rude whites daily. "I really came to grips with what it meant to live like those black South Africans live today," she related. "I came face to face with daily reminders of my own inferior status."

She gritted her teeth and went on. Tips were good. She saved enough to pay her tuition and had the courage to come back for another summer at Ocean City although she didn't relish having impolite whites throw their wet bathing suits across the counter at her.

That summer of 1933 proved to be another major turning point in her life. Mrs. Harris, ever the thoughtful mother figure, had arranged regular "forums" on Sunday for the many young black college students working at the resort. "Oh, how we talked and debated during those sessions," Senator Welcome recalled. There was one dominant topic that prevailed — the race question in the United States.

With racial pride, a high intelligence and increasing skills, these young blacks were developing attitudes far different from those of



their parents. They could not accept the second-rate status that American society afforded them. They knew in their hearts and minds that they were not inferior. At Ocean City and in countless similar groups around the country, the consensus was being formed. They were ready to challenge the status quo.

How to do it? That was the question of the hour, the day. Yes, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had been formed in 1909 and was searching for legal means to make racial challenges. And, yes, there was the National Urban League formed a year later. But these organizations had yet to capture the imagination of young blacks.

There was Booker T. Washington, the prominent educator and scientist, who argued that blacks should accept an inferior political and social position and move slowly toward political enfranchisement. He had argued that one superior farm and one superior black family was a greater step forward than a ton of fancy talk. There was Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican-born prophet, who maintained that blacks would be forever mistreated until an independent black nation emerged, one that was strong enough to defend their rights. His movement died out when he was deported.

As Senator Welcome remembered, both Washington and Garvey were "no longer powerful influences" on those young college blacks of the 1930's. There were new heroes, scholars such as W.E.B. DuBois of the NAACP and Alain Locke of Howard University, as well as writers like Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. The Ocean City students could identify with this new wave of provocative thinkers.

DuBois thundered with militant rhetoric, urging blacks to stand up and strike back against racial injustice. His early writings were practical guides for action. "Education must not be simply teaching work," he wrote in arguing against Washington, "it must teach life." He called for a new generation of leaders. "The talented tenth of

the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people," he wrote. "The Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." DuBois should have added exceptional women, as well.

A philosophy professor, Locke described a growing black renaissance in his celebrated 1925 volume, "The New Negro: An Interpretation." He proclaimed that the day of "aunties" and "uncles" and "mammies" was gone along with Uncle Tom and Sambo. He, too, called for new leaders with specific goals to reach. "The Negro mind reaches out as yet to nothing but American wants, American ideals," he held. It could not succeed without "the fullest sharing of American culture and institutions". In brief, Locke held that blacks had to share fully in the American dream to make the country and that vision viable for all.

If Locke appealed to reason, Countee Cullen, the poet, touched both hearts and minds. One of his early poems, "Heritage", was popular in the late Twenties and early Thirties. It was an eloquent cry for humanity for those of African heritage. It would be recited in groups and forums like that in Ocean City. It concluded with these lines:

*All day long and all night through,  
One thing only must I do,  
Quench my pride and cool my blood,  
Lest I perish in the flood,  
Lest a hidden ember set,  
Timber that I thought was wet,  
Burning like the driest flax,  
Melting like the merest wax,  
Lest the grave restore its dead,  
Not yet has my heart or head,  
In the least way realized,  
They and I are civilized.*

Senator Welcome and her friends found these voices appealing. "They were our intelligentsia. We felt they were speaking to us when they called for

the emergence of 'the new Negro,' who would represent the 'talented tenth' of black society and lead that society into political and social equality," she wrote.

Inspired as she was, Senator Welcome found another compelling reason to attend those forums with regularity. She found "a kindred spirit who shared my dreams," a young medical student from Honduras, one Henry C. Welcome. "Oh, how he impressed me," she recalled in "My Life and Times," a brief biography told to James M. Abraham. "There was something about him that I liked - he was so serious." He was idealistic. He dreamed of being the best of surgeons. "I had my dreams of someday doing something to help our people." The two dreamers were not far apart.

Young Henry Welcome proposed in the summer of 1934. Senator Welcome wasn't ready. She preferred to be friends, just pals. That's how he got his nickname, "Palie". He would remain her "Palie" for the rest of their lives. But, it was not until December, 1935, that she would travel to Nashville during his final year at Meharry Medical School and be married. Dr. Welcome managed an internship at Provident Hospital in Baltimore and joined his wife in the summer of 1936. They were starting what she described as "the happiest years of my life -- as Mrs. Henry C. Welcome".

The young bride had already been teaching the sixth grade at Baltimore's School No. 126 at Henrietta and Montgomery Streets in South Baltimore, the start of an eleven-year career. She was in the segregated school system and she noticed that despite all her "love and attention" too many children were skipping classes. The answer was a stark one in those depression days. Too many pupils had neither clothes nor shoes. In 1937, when "Palie" became an assistant resident surgeon, she transferred to the Booker T. Washington Junior High School on McCulloh Street. Together they saved enough money to buy a small home at 1100 Harlem Avenue.

Senator Welcome wanted to keep climbing that ladder of education and Palie supported her. She graduated from what was then Morgan State College in 1939. When war came, Dr. Welcome was rejected because of a supposed bad heart. Senator Welcome thought that was an excuse. "At the time, the government was not that keen of black officers or soldiers for that matter," she wrote. But, she had her husband with her, an appreciated consolation.

Blacks were barred from attending any graduate school in the State, but Maryland paid the tuition of qualified students to study out of state. It was a ruling offensive to both the Welcomes. When Senator Welcome began summer work at New York University for a master's degree, she paid her own way. And, she won her degree.

With her husband's practice doing well, Senator Welcome started on what she called her "repaying" time, helping those who had helped her in her difficult years. She and Dr. Welcome had an agreement not to have children of their own. The vision of her mother's death in childbirth haunted her. They would have a family by proxy and by adoption. They would remain true pals, as if they were to be always young and always in love. If he was a Palie to her, so she was a Palie to him. So even birthday notes might be exchanged, Palie to Palie. And through all those years, they raised a large extended family with "a whole line of relatives we sort of adopted" moving in and out of the house over the years.

Two of Senator Welcome's brothers, David and Paul, moved in and stayed while they finished school. Then came Charlene Griffin and, later, Joanne Allen. It was Mary Sue, Senator Welcome's niece, who came from the South to captivate the Welcomes when she was seven years old. She was legally adopted to become part of the family for life. The Welcomes worried about Mary Sue for though she was active and precocious, she seemed thin. Dr. Welcome plied her with caramels and chocolates.

He prepared elixirs for her. When Mary Sue, the timid eater, didn't take to stewed tomatoes, Dr. Welcome produced a more generous bribe by buying her her very first tricycle.

If it was a loving family, there was also discipline. "I got spanked quite a bit," Mary Sue recalled. The routine went that Senator Welcome waited in the bathroom. It was a guilty Mary Sue who came forward and flopped over her knees, and out came the stinging hairbrush. It would be followed by wailing and strong hugs. The hairbrush was a temporary weapon. Mary Sue was the treasured child. "A finer daughter no woman could ever have," said Senator Welcome. "I loved her as a child and a young woman — she made us proud as she asserted her independence and built a life for herself."

There was a further extended family for Senator Welcome. She had joined the NAACP in 1937. When Dr. Welcome's career progressed so that they could afford to live on one income, she began a period of community activism, lightened by some social activities as well as extensive foreign travel. The signal to see the world came when Dr. Welcome was admitted to the American College of Surgeons. The Welcomes soon were active in the National Medical Association, an organization of black doctors, that sponsored trips so that all could see how the rest of the world lived and struggled. The Welcomes went often to Europe, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

"I always liked to look my best," Senator Welcome affirmed. Her best was a sleek and satin look that was complimented by distinctive bright colors. Above all, she loved hats, wide-brimmed ones and narrow ones, hats for all occasions. It was also a time when her picture began appearing regularly in the Afro-American newspaper, a leader in society.

It was Dr. Welcome who "helped me keep my feet on the ground". Senator Welcome discovered double-pinochle and played the game until dawn, as well as mastering bridge. But, gradually, she moved

more and more into social activism. Senator Welcome recalled how she and Dr. Welcome talked "about how good life had been to us". He reminded her that she now had the time with retirement "to find some way to help our people". He pledged his full support. Senator Welcome saw the small world around her, her people, needing help.

She became more active in black professional women's organizations, like the National Council of Negro Women, and the Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Both groups were battling racism and prejudice. It was the start of a period of community activism that led to the door of politics. There was little that she missed, joining organizations from scouting to the March of Dimes, and dozens of other worthy groups as well.

Her emphasis had to be her community, the black community. The task was Herculean. By the end of World War II, black unemployment had jumped to 17 percent. Thousands of black migrants were squeezed together in the poorest of housing. Cheap tenements had been thrown up overnight. There was little regard for sanitation, none for beauty. The areas above North Avenue and along Pennsylvania Avenue were known as the "Tuberculosis Ward" of the city.

Senator Welcome threw herself into neighborhood work. By 1946, she was elected president of the Northwest Improvement Association, an area plagued with overcrowded buildings. In some older buildings originally built for one family, there were eight, ten, and even thirteen families shoe-horned in together. Even by 1951, a survey showed that 92.6 percent of blacks lived in blighted areas of the city compared to 27 percent of whites.

To fight this housing blight, Senator Welcome joined the Citizen's Housing Council, the forerunner of the Citizens' Planning and Housing Association. It was one of the early examples of blacks and whites working together to solve the city's ills. This led her to one of her first major public battles, a fight against, of all things, fire

escapes. Greedy landlords had cut up larger homes in such tiny units that they were required to erect fire escapes on the front of the building as well as the back to meet fire department regulations.

To Senator Welcome, they were plain "awful". Returning home from a trip of a few days, she was shocked to find one of those rickety fire escapes thrown up on a house two doors from her own home. She was incensed. She found that the law required that a notice of a permit had to be posted for at least ten days before construction of such a contraption. No one had seen such a sign. Senator Welcome organized the community. She forced a hearing before the Mayor and the zoning board. The community's protests were heard. Down came the fire escape, a step that led to an ordinance *forbidding such monstrosities on the front of buildings.*

"The lesson we learned was that we won because we were organized — and we didn't forget it," wrote Senator Welcome. "We began pushing for better municipal services, such as more police protection, better trash pickups, and all the other things we thought we paid for with our taxes." Her housing activism had brought her into the world of politics.

She was ready to join in other battles of segregation and discrimination. Blacks, for example, could not use toilets in most downtown buildings. Only restaurants in black areas would serve them meals. They could not shop at many downtown stores and, where they could shop, they could not use credit or try on clothes. "I remember the humiliation of going to a white-owned establishment, sitting down, and being ignored or asked to leave," Senator Welcome recalled. It hurt Senator Welcome deeply that she could not try on hats in some of the better stores in the city. Now as a member of the National Urban League, she organized protests.

Senator Welcome was not a novice to all political protests. She had been a member of the NAACP since the mid-Thirties. Though it had been

founded in Baltimore in 1913, it had languished until the Eastern Shore lynchings in 1935. Led by Lillie May Jackson, the Baltimore chapter grew to be one of the largest in the country. The organization moved to boycott stores where blacks were not employed. It launched legal attacks on the State's educational system to obtain equal pay for black teachers. And, it entered politics by throwing its support to candidates, like Mayor Theodore McKeldin, a Republican, who promised fair treatment for blacks. Led by Juanita Jackson Mitchell, the NAACP led the legal battle against racial discrimination in the Fifties.

"Over the years, the Mitchells and I would have our clashes," Senator Welcome said, "but we never differed on goals." The methods sometimes caused disagreement but Senator Welcome agreed that "no one can deny their accomplishments", such as the landmark 1954 school desegregation decision.

But the movement to gain equal justice for blacks was broader than simply the NAACP. It was made up of a multiplicity of forces that won blacks the right to try on clothes in Baltimore department stores in 1955. A year later, separate lists for State job applicants were dropped. More black candidates were entering politics. In the Welcome's Fourth District, Harry Cole, a Republican, won a Senate seat in 1954 despite the opposition of the dominant Democratic political machine led by Jack Pollack.

What transformed Verda Welcome, the activist, into Verda Welcome the candidate for office? There are several answers, all probably correct. For one, Senator Welcome tired of calling up official after official as she was searching for the right break, the proper decision. She understood that she could do it herself. It was undoubtedly the battle against the location of a sporting arena in Druid Hill Park that nudged her into action. "I got into politics by accident," she explained years later in an interview. More blacks were needed in office. She asked herself, "Why not?" Then she went to Palie. He had the same answer, "Why not?" To Senator Welcome, "that was as good as saying, go ahead".

Her first campaign was in 1958 for the House of Delegates against the heavily favored Pollack slate. She ran her own race in her own way. In April, a dozen women organized "Women for Welcome" that turned into a volunteer street organization. It would turn into a permanent club that became famed as the "Valiant Women's (Welcome Wagon) Democratic Club". It was this "merry band of sisters" with whom she traveled to victory. There were so many, like Mignon Atkins, Ida Russell, Ethel Wilson, Ethel Wise, Beatrice Lewis, Anne Green, Willie Johnson, Fannie Hamilton, Clementine Thomas, Melvina Lanier, Marlene Brown, Iona Williams, Mary Taylor, Ida Parsons, and Eleanora Archie, to name a few. And no list could ever be complete without the name of Jim Fleming, the person she considered her wisest advisor.

The Welcome Wagon was a familiar feature that rolled through her district to get voters registered. She was elected narrowly. The tougher fight came in 1962, a contest so close against the Pollack-endorsed Senator J. Alvin Jones that the ballot boxes were all sealed and guarded around the clock.

Less than a hundred votes would decide that historic contest. Senator Welcome showed the poise of a general on the battlefield. "She was calm," recalled soon-to-be Mayor, Thomas D'Alesandro III, then the city's Supervisor of Elections. "She was considerate — she maintained her dignity." And she won, and entered the Senate, the first black woman to do so anywhere, for an historic twenty-year legislative career.

When she was in her waning years, she was asked if she would "do it over again?" Senator Welcome nodded. "The only regret I have is that I didn't start earlier." She was modest about what she regarded as her proudest pieces of legislation. There was the elevation of Morgan State to university status, the law allowing intermarriage, and the State's help for Provident Hospital.

What did she want for an epitaph?

"When it's all said and done, the thing I want people to remember is that Senator Verda Welcome gave all that she had to getting the job done."

She could add another. Like the Langston Hughes that she used to read in her formative Ocean City forum days, she might have told how she suffered from a lifetime of battling discrimination against race and gender. She, too, was the one sent to the kitchen when company came. She could add that after her life, it was different. No more hiding when company came.

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